Muruga, Thai Pusam and Kavadi Attam

Surapadman

Varangi, an apsara falls in love with an asura Vajranga. She bears several children after which Vajranga goes off into the forest to meditate. Surapadman, one of their children, performs a penance. When Shiva appears before him, he says that only a child that is not born from Shiva's union with a female should be able to kill him. He assumes that this is a foolproof way of making himself invincible. Shiva grants him the boon and vanishes.

Surapadman wreaks havoc in all the three worlds. He kills the human beings on earth, imprisons the devas in Swarga and treats their wives like his concubines.

Shiva creates Muruga

Shiva, the all-knowing one, is furious. He releases flames of anger from his forehead and creates a very handsome, talented son who is well versed in all aspects of warfare and names him Muruga.

Parvati blesses Muruga with the Vel

Parvati transforms into Shakti, releases a single shaft of dazzling golden light from her being and gifts a light slender spear made of this light to her son Muruga. She tells Muruga that this Vel will bring him Vetri – "victory" when he wages a war against Surapadman.

Muruga's Vel brings "Vetri"

When Surapadman comes to know about Muruga’s birth and intentions, he transforms himself into a huge mango tree. He assumes Muruga will not be able to find him. But Muruga sees through his gimmick. He hurls his Vel at the mango tree, splits it into two halves and brings an end to Surapadman.

Surapadman ask Muruga for forgiveness and tells him that he wishes to be remembered forever. Muruga looks at the two halves of the mango tree. He transforms one half of the tree into a rooster and the other half into a peacock. The peacock becomes Muruga’s vahan and the rooster becomes the emblem on his flag.

The story of the Kavadi

Shiva requests Rishi Agastya to carry the hills of Shivagiri and Shaktigiri and place them in South India. Rishi Agastya immediately sets out on this journey. He tires after a while. So he puts both the hills down in a forest and asks his disciple, Idumban to continue with his work.

Idumban continues with Rishi Agastya’s mission but he too feels tired when he reaches the outskirts of Palani. He tries to lift the hills after a while but is surprised to see that he cannot move them at all.

Idumban sees a bare-bodied boy wearing just a loincloth looking at him with amusement. Idumban asks the lad to help him. But the lad calmly says that the hills belong to him. Idumban is shocked and starts fighting with him. Soon, he realizes that the youngster was none other than Lord Muruga.

Lord Muruga kills Idumban but relents after a while, restores him to life and grants him a boon of his choice.

Idumban says that the devotees of Muruga should worship him first by carrying a Kavadi (symbolizing the two hills) on their shoulders before they climb up the hills to worship Muruga. Lord Muruga grants him this boon and vanishes.

Thai Pusam

Thai Pusam is an annual religious festival in which devotees of Muruga set out on a pilgrimage to the Palani hills or any Muruga shrine in January/February (Thai in Tamil) when the Pushya star is at its highest point. It is believed that Shiva created Muruga and Parvati gave Muruga the Vel on this day, so it is Lord Muruga’s birthday.

Devotees of Muruga eat only one vegetarian meal in a day for the entire month before they start the pilgrimage. They abstain from sex and fast for 24 hours on the eve of Thaipusam before carrying the Kavadi up the hills to the shrine of Muruga to seek his blessings and also to destroy their inherent negative traits.

Kavadi Attam

Kavadi Attam is a unique group dance in which devotees pray for their well being, express their gratitude and devotion to their lord Muruga. Both men and women can participate in the Kavadi Attam. Devotees believe that if they participate in the Kavadi Attam the entire family and community will be blessed with good fortune. Some devotees sanctify a pair of anklets and wear them before they set out on their pilgrimage.

Kavadis can be simple pots of milk, rose water or flowers. The milk or the rose water is poured over the idol of Lord Muruga when they do his darshan.

Self-Mortification

Some choose to carry heavy Kavadis, perform rites of self-mortification and consciously put themselves through pain to absolve themselves of their Karmic debts.

Such devotees pierce their cheeks and tongue with sharp spears, symbolizing the Vel to pay their respects to Lord Muruga. The pain of the devotee, however, is shared by the entire family and community. They stay with the devotee when his tongue and cheeks are pierced and chant the word “Arohara” repeatedly because they believe that the devotee is about to be blessed by the deity.

They beat drums rhythmically and chant in unison to express their solidarity with the devotee. The priest and other family and community members carry the Kavadi and know that the devotee will enter into a trance while the piercing is being done. (This is believed to be their way of coping with the intense pain at a psychological level.)

The belief is that Lord Muruga enters the body of the devotee during the trance after which he/she shares the sacredness of Lord Muruga with the others who help him reach that state.

The beliefs associated with Kavadi Attam

The rhythmic trance-like movements of the devotee, the drum rolls, the loud music and chants energizes the Kavadi. All the family and community members dance in perfect

synchronization. This helps the devotee (and the community members too!) transcend the pain that he/she is experiencing in the material world and connect to the spiritual realm of Muruga.

The belief is that these rituals create a psychological upheaval of human emotions for a short span of time during which Lord Muruga enters, possesses and controls the mind and the body as the devotee performs the Kavadi Attam. The devotee has no control over his body at this time. He/She does not even remember entering into a trance. The family and community members allow the devotee to enter into a frenzied state.

The Trance

When he/she loses total control over himself/herself the leader of the community approaches him/her, holds his/her head and applies some Thiruneeru, holy ash on his/her forehead after which he/she comes out of his/her trance-like state.

The devotee is extremely exhausted at this time. It takes him quite some time for him/her to come out of his/her possessed state of mind. There is complete understanding amongst the entire community at this time and they take complete care of all the devotees during this phase. This adds meaning and value to the performance and marks the end of the ritual called Kavadi Attam.

Essence of Kavadi Attam

Sometimes despite our best efforts, things fall apart in our lives. Repeatedly. That’s when we understand how powerful our Karma can be. We have to look through this lens to understand

a concept like Kavadi Attam – where we are willing to take extreme measures to clear our Karmic debt and move on with our lives. Not all of us have that kind of courage though. We prefer to find God through other ways. But at the very least, a ritual like Kavadi Attam sobers us up to the reality of life and helps us realize how important it is to minimize our Karmic baggage.